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ABSTRACT

In winter term, 1981-82, a study was conducted at Miami-Dade Community College (MDCC) to ascertain the effect of a low-cost intervention on the retention rate of full-time, first-time-in-college, black students at the college. The intervention consisted of two successive letters encouraging students to re-enroll and obtain counseling services if they were experiencing problems. These letters were mailed to 284 of the 569 students in the defined population, and analyses were conducted to determine whether the students who received the intervention letters had a higher retention rate than those who did not. Though students receiving the letters had a 5% higher return rate than the students not receiving the letters, the difference in retention rates was not statistically significant, and further examination was warranted. In winter 1982-83, a replication of the original study revealed that students who did not receive the letters had a 3% greater rate of return than the students who did receive the letters. Conclusions from the study indicated that the differences between the two groups were not the result of the intervention strategy, and it was recommended that this type of intervention program be discontinued. The intervention letters are appended. (HB)

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AN ASSESSMENT OF THE USE OF PERSONAL LETTERS TO INCREASE RETENTION AMONG BLACK STUDENTS

Research Report No. 83-35

November 1983

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OFFICE OF INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH

John Losak, Dean

JC 840 077

An Assessment of the Use of Personal Letters
to Increase Retention Among Black Students

During the Winter Term, 1981-82, a study was conducted by the Office of Institutional Research which attempted to ascertain the effect of a low cost intervention on the retention rate of full-time, first-time-in-college black non-Hispanic students at Miami-Dade. The intervention consisted of two successive letters signed by the Vice President for Education which were mailed to half of the defined population. The other half did not receive letters. The primary objective of the study was to answer the following question: Did black non-Hispanic students who received the intervention letters have a higher retention rate than those in the same population who did not receive the letters?

The results of the study were reported in Research Report No.82-33 and indicated that the intervention group (letter receivers) had a five percentage point higher return rate the following Fall Term than did the non-intervention group. In Table 1 below, data are presented as they appeared in Research Report 82-33. While the difference in retention rates between the two groups was not found to be statistically significant (i.e., the probability of such a difference being due to chance or sampling error was greater than five percent), it was decided that the difference in favor of the intervention group was still representative of an increase in the retention of black students and was of practical significance which was the goal of the intervention strategy.

Table 1

Retention Rates of Letter Receivers
Versus Non-Letter Receivers

	Letter Receivers (Intervention Group)		Non-Letter Receivers (Non-Intervention Group)	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Returnees	160	56	146	51
Non-Returnees	124	44	139	49
Total	284	100	285	100
A chi-square test of independence between the two groups.	$X^2 = 1.29$ d.f. = 1 Not significant			

In the Winter Term of 1982-83, a decision was made to undertake a replication of the original study. As was done in the first study, all full-time, first-time-in-college black non-Hispanic students (N=493) were identified and a 50% sample was drawn. Following the methodology as closely as possible, two intervention letters were mailed to the sample. An analysis of return rates was conducted the following Fall Term. As seen in Table 2, the second attempt to increase retention among blacks was unsuccessful and, in fact, resulted in the non-intervention group having a return rate three percentage points greater than those students receiving the intervention letters. As was the case in the first study, this difference was also found not to be statistically significant and suggests that the use of the letter is not useful in increasing black student retention.

Table 2

Retention Rates of Letter Receivers
Versus Non-Letter Receivers

	Letter Receivers (Intervention Group)		Non-Letter Receivers (Non-Intervention Group)	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Returnees	147	60	155	63
Non-Returnees	100	40	91	37
Total	247	100	246	100
A chi-square test of independence between the two groups.	$X^2 = 0.63$ d.f. = 1 Not Significant			

In summary, given the low cost of the intervention program to increase retention rates among black non-Hispanic students, it was reasonable to decide that a five percentage point difference in retention rates found in the first study was of practical significance even though it did not represent a statistically significant difference at the .05 level. A replication of the experimental research was undertaken and resulted in data which again are not statistically significant; indeed are not even in the same direction. Therefore, it is concluded that differences between the two groups were not the result of the intervention strategy and it is not recommended that any further intervention program of this type be continued. Other efforts to increase black student retention should continue to be explored by College personnel.

Please contact Ted Wright, Office of Institutional Research, if you have any further questions regarding the replication of the original study.

MIAMI-DADE COMMUNITY COLLEGE / District Administration, 11011 S.W. 104 Street, Miami, Florida 33176

VICE PRESIDENT
FOR EDUCATION
(305) 596-1345

Appendix I

April 1983

Dear Student:

You have been identified as a student who enrolled at Miami-Dade for the first time last term and enrolled again this Winter Term. Our records show that some students in their first year at Miami-Dade who have enrolled for two consecutive semesters do not return for the following Fall Term. Generally speaking, students who do continue for their second year have a high graduation rate.

The purpose of this letter is to encourage you to re-enroll for the next Fall Term if you have not yet completed your educational goals. If you are experiencing career or personal problems which may interfere with the achievement of your educational goals, please contact a guidance counselor on your campus so that Miami-Dade can support your continuing course of studies.

We would appreciate your taking a few minutes to answer the questionnaire below. The letter may be returned to Miami-Dade in the enclosed postage-paid envelope.

Thank you,

J. Terence Kelly

J. Terence Kelly
Vice President for Education

PLEASE CHECK ONE OF THE FOLLOWING FOUR ITEMS.

___1) I have not fulfilled my educational goals and I will be returning to Miami-Dade. When do you plan to return?_____

___2) When I complete this Winter Term, I will have fulfilled my educational goals, and I am not planning to return to Miami-Dade.

___3) Although I have not fulfilled my educational goals, I will not be returning to Miami-Dade. Reasons?_____

_____

_____

___4) Undecided.

IN WHAT WAYS CAN MIAMI-DADE BE HELPING YOU MORE TO ENSURE YOUR CONTINUING AS A STUDENT HERE AND TO REACH YOUR EDUCATIONAL GOALS?_____

_____

MIAMI-DADE COMMUNITY COLLEGE / District Administration 11011 S W 104 Street, Miami, Florida 331

Appendix II

VICE PRESIDENT
FOR EDUCATION
(305) 596-1345

July 8, 1983

Dear Student:

In April of this year, I sent you a letter asking about your future educational plans. Our records indicate that you have now completed two semesters at Miami-Dade. Thus, you have made a good start toward a full commitment to complete a program of study offered by the community college. I am most hopeful that you will continue your enrollment at Miami-Dade.

If there is some reason why you may not be able to return for the Fall Term, perhaps an advisor or counselor could help you explore ways to deal with your situation and permit you to continue your course of study. Registration for the Fall Term begins July 18 and classes begin August 23. I look forward to your return to Miami-Dade.

Sincerely,

J. Terence Kelly
Vice President for Education

JTK/sf

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